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SUBJECT: SOUTHWEST CHINA: CONVERSATIONS WITH XICHANG CHRISTIANS

REF: 05 CHENGDU 548

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CLASSIFIED BY: James A. Boughner, Consul General, U.S. Consulate General, Chengdu.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: According to Catholic and Protestant church members in the city of Xichang in southern Sichuan Province, urban and rural churches in the area operate relatively freely. The local Catholic community boasts nine priests and 25 nuns, regularly receives priests from South Korea and Taiwan, and appears to follow the Vatican on religious matters. Bulletin boards at the Xichang cathedral are openly posted with Vatican publications and pictures of Pope Benedict XVI. Protestants from rural areas travel to Xichang for baptisms, but meet in groups in their villages for regular services. End summary.

Catholic Church

¶2. (SBU) During a recent visit to Xichang, the capital of Liangshan Prefecture in southern Sichuan, Congenoff made an informal survey of local Catholic and Protestant Church facilities. The Catholic Cathedral, originally a family temple that was transformed into a church a century ago, was renovated in 1997. A priest, who had graduated from the Catholic Seminary in Pi County in Chengdu three years ago, and two parish workers spoke with Congenoff. Nine priests and 25 nuns live in buildings adjacent to the Cathedral. All the priests are under the age of forty. The older generation of priests trained outside China has for the most part passed away, although Bishop Chen (reftel) of the adjacent Diocese of Yibin in Sichuan, who was trained and ordained by French missionaries, is still vigorous in his nineties. Xichang's priests visit congregations to preach and say mass on a rural circuit that takes them away from the cathedral for three or so weeks at a time. They are also involved in rural charitable work in cooperation with the Ministry of Civil Affairs.

¶3. (C) The Xichang Cathedral is in regular contact with Catholic priests from South Korea and Taiwan. A priest or nun from Taiwan or South Korea comes every year to stay at the Cathedral for a year. A Catholic organization in Taiwan led by a priest with a doctorate in theology helps with funds for renovating church facilities, charitable work, and the theological studies of the priests and nuns. The priest Congenoff spoke with said he studied Catholic theology for several years at the Catholic Seminary in Chengdu followed by a year of study in Beijing. The Chengdu seminary trains priests for Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou and Chongqing. When Congenoff visited at mid-day all the nuns were away. A parish worker said that the nuns were off doing religious education.

¶4. (C) Congenoff noted in the church office a number of Catholic publications: two magazines published respectively by the dioceses of Chongqing and Kunming and a Chinese national Catholic magazine. During a tour of the Xichang Cathedral, a parish worker explained that the original architectural design of French missionaries is well-preserved today since the structure was not damaged during the Cultural Revolution, which was relatively mild in Xichang. Pinned to church bulletin boards in the back were several articles with pictures of Pope Benedict XVI. Nowhere on the exterior or interior of the church were there any signs that referred to the Catholic Patriotic Church to which all Catholic churches in China must officially belong. Photos of the church interior are among a collection of Xichang trip pictures at

Protestant Church

¶5. (SBU) The Protestant church, an older building that has not been recently renovated, is built hard against another building on a street corner and opens inwards to its own small compound. (Note: Officially recognized Protestant Churches in China belong to the "Three Selves Patriotic Movement" which was organized in ¶1951. The "Three Selves" stand for self-governance, self-support and self-propagation.") The small compound contained another building labeled "Children's Sunday School," which had a small red banner proclaiming "Jesus has Risen" (Yesu Fuhuo) on it, and a church office. Although the church and office were closed, a member of the congregation agreed to talk with Congenoff. He said that a French minister had guided the church until 1947, but it since been led by Chinese.

¶6. (SBU) According to the man, most of the local people who attend church regularly are retired like himself, since younger people are busy with family and work. There are also some

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Christian groups that meet in the countryside although they come to the church in Xichang for baptisms. (Note: In the Chengdu area of Sichuan 500 km to the north, Protestant meetings in the countryside that have fewer than 15 worshippers appear to be generally not harassed by government authorities even if not officially registered). The man remarked to Congenoff that members of his church do not have any contact with Catholics. (Note: In Chinese there is no word for Christian with the same range of meaning as in English. The word Christian is normally translated as "jidutu," which refers to Protestant Christianity. As a result, Chinese Protestants and Catholics seem to be less aware than Christians in other countries of the similarities in their religious beliefs. End note).

Comments

¶7. (SBU) The veneer of the "Chinese Patriotic Catholic Church," which based on Congenoff's experience visiting churches in the region can be thin, did not seem visible at all at the Xichang Cathedral. Tolerance of religious freedom in Southwest China appears in practice to vary from place to place according to the policies pursued by the local Religious Affairs Bureau. Christians with whom Congenoff spoke seemed fairly content with the current state of religious affairs in Xichang.

¶8. (U) Appendix: A History of the Xichang Diocese posted outside the Xichang Cathedral is translated below:

Catholic Diocese of Xichang - A Brief Introduction

The Catholic faith came to Xichang region (then called Ningyuan Fu) in the early 19th century. In 1903, the foreign priest Guang Ruoyu of the Xufu diocese came from Yibin to the Ailang district of Huili and to Xichang to preach. Since the Qing Dynasty had conferred upon Guang Ruoyu a high award, the "wuping dingdai," where ever he went to preach, he was welcomed by local

governments and people and his missionary work went well and the numbers of converts to Catholicism grew steadily. In 1904, he bought the Xiao Family Temple and in 1908 transformed the Li Family Temple. In 1910, Xichang was separated from the Yibin Diocese and the Xichang Diocese was established. The Xichang Diocese was administered from 1910 - 1924 by the Paris Foreign Missions Society with Guang Ruoyu as its first bishop. During 1910 - 1916 many new churches and monasteries were built throughout the region. In 1915 Bishop Guang Ruoyu was transferred to Guangdong to do religious work there.

The second bishop was Pu Enyou, an interim substitute bishop (1918 - 1925) established the Ningyuan Fu diocese, built a Latin School, a convent, an elementary and middle school (the Anna School), a monastery for spiritual contemplation and penance. In 1926, Pu Enyou died.

The third bishop, Bao Mingyan, (French, 1927) headed the diocese for twenty years. The diocese expanded considerably and preaching was done and churches built in all parts of the diocese. Social services carried out by the diocese including operating a hospital and providing free medicine, helping the poor and building homes for elderly impoverished people who were without support.

Statistics for the Ningyuan Diocese in 1948 just before Liberation: Over 30 churches, 32 Chinese and foreign priests (19 Chinese, 13 foreign), 34 nuns (23 Chinese, 11 foreign) and 10,968 Catholics.

After the Third Session of the Eleventh Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, the state implemented a policy of allowing normal religious activities.

The fourth bishop of the Xichang Diocese was Xie Chaogang (1991 - 1999) from Huili in Sichuan Province. He was the first bishop chosen in the Xichang Diocese after Liberation and the first bishop chosen and consecrated [by the diocese]. During the term of Bishop Xie, he worked vigorously to implement the religious policy of the Party Committee and Government. Since the restoration of the convent in 1993, over 90 nuns have been trained for dioceses in the southwest. Now 25 nuns reside in the convent.

Currently the Xichang Diocese does not have a bishop so Father Lei Jiawei was chosen (1999 - present) to lead all aspects of the work of the diocese.

The Xichang Diocese now covers 22 cities and counties in Liangshan Prefecture and Panzhihua including about 35,000 Catholics, 13 new and old churches, seven religious activity points, nine priests, eight monks and 25 nuns.

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Currently, the Xichang Diocese has established these social services organizations: The Huili Catholics Sophia Nursery School, the Dechang County Catholic Ming'ai Nursery School, the Qiangzhou Catholic Tian'ai Nursery School, making a contribution to society.

End translation of text.
BOUGHNER